

SUSTAINABILITY

How Climate Change Is Making Refugees in Bangladesh

Bangladesh and countries like it are on the frontline of mass migrations as a result of global warming, Part 2 of a special series

• By [Lisa Friedman](#) on March 9, 2009

*The second in a series of stories on Bangladesh and climate migration.
GABURA, Bangladesh – The dam burst before dawn.*

The men of the village knew it could happen. All day and all night they trudged by the hundreds, shirtless and shoeless, up a slippery hill, hauling baskets of mud on their heads. It was Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of daylong fasts. But the men had a only few hours to try to strengthen the mushy barrier that protected their homes from the dangerously rising tide. Together, in between grueling shifts, they broke fast and prayed for the mud to hold.

When the dam finally collapsed, there was nothing to do but run.

"You cannot believe the strength of the water when it broke. I've never seen the strength of the water like this," recalled Shaidullah, 35, sitting in the boat he paddled to safety that September night. "We were panicking."

That night, the embankment was breached in eight places along the Kholpetua River and other waterways that branch out like a network of arteries from the Bay of Bengal. No one was killed, but local officials said more than 35,000 people were marooned. About 6,000 were left homeless.

Water risks are a part of life in this low-lying country dominated by the reaches of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. But scientists and environmental activists said the September flood, which happened during a lunar high tide, was deeply unusual for the time of year.

Even more worrisome, they say, is that climate change is making the unusual more routine. Locals say the result is a massive upheaval of traditional village life.

For many years, floods have been bringing saline water further inland, destroying the rice fields that once sustained the villages. Shrimp farms, many built with World Bank investment, have rapidly replaced the rice paddies.

But residents say the shrimp farms employ a fraction of the people needed to harvest rice. At the same time, a cheap form of food, rice, is being replaced with a pricey one. The Bangladesh government earns more than \$400 million annually in shrimp exports, but few Bengalis can afford to eat it themselves.

To make matters even worse, devastating storms like the one that devoured the region in September once were one-in-20-year events. Scientists calculate that floods of that magnitude now happen almost once every five years.

Time to sow, time to reap, time to leave for the cities

Now villagers in Gabura and parts of flood-prone southwest Bangladesh say it might finally be time to leave for good. Dozens of families interviewed along the coast said they have lived the close-knit village life for generations, and they're familiar with the rhythm of temporarily moving along when things get bad. The difference now, they say, is that brothers, husbands and uncles are leaving for the cities in greater numbers than ever before – and this time, they're not coming home.

"Not only do a lot of people want to leave, a lot of people have left," said Masudualam, the former district chief in Gabura.

Mohon Mondal, who runs an environmental group in the region and educates villagers about climate change, said the growing number of migrations means that woman and children are left alone for long periods – and sometimes abandoned altogether – when men go off to the cities for work. Village elders, too, are increasingly left to grow old without their children around them.

Steering a motorized wooden boat down the Kholpetua River, Mondal looked out at the gray, sloping embankments. A handful are made of brick, but most, like the one in Gabura, are just mud and have never been fortified with anything stronger. Malnourished goats scampered across the narrow river wall, and old men with long beards walked barefoot, leaning on wooden canes.

Mondal pointed out uprooted mangrove trees along the way. The mangroves serve as a natural storm barrier and bore the brunt of Cyclone Sidr in 1997. More than 3,000 people died in that cyclone, but scientists credit the Sundarbans forest mangroves with protecting Bangladesh from the very worst of Sidr's wrath. Now river erosion and creeping salinity are slowly killing the trees.

"People are living outside the dam because of river erosion," Mondal said. "They have lost a lot of things. Several times, their houses."

With more flooding, good jobs dry up

He pointed to the old men and teenage girls – and even children as young as 7 – casting nets in the water for shrimp fry. It's a job locals call "working the net." They earn the equivalent of about 50 cents a day, and it's about the only type of job left here. Mondal grew up in the area just outside the Sundarbans and said life now is completely different from the one he remembers.

"People used to play outside. You'd see kids playing. Now everyone is working. Everybody is worried about how to eat," he said. "A lot of people are leaving here now. They are going away, even to India."

Standing atop the mud embankment in Gabura, which a month after the tidal flood, men were still working to restore, Masudualam said he believes the flights are temporary. "Hopefully, if we can strengthen this area, people will return," he said.

Amjat Ali, 70, of nearby Chakbara, harbors no such hopes.

His son, a farmer who fished to supplement his income, moved last year to the district seat of Satkhira. Now the son drives a ricksha, and Ali said he does not expect the boy to ever move back home.

"If he comes back, what is he going to eat here?" Ali said. "The land is getting spoiled. There's no way to earn anything over here and nothing to eat here."

Abuisa, 32, who goes only by his first name, is the last of his seven brothers still living in Chakbara. Their father once owned land but, he said, "that's fallen into the river." The sons fished and foraged honey in the Sundarbans forest.

'How will we move from here? We don't have anything'

In the past three years, four of his brothers moved to the nearby city of Jessore on the Bhairab River. After the most recent flood, the fifth brother went to Kuhlana, a port city, to find work in the rice mills. A tiger mauled the sixth to death. Now Abuisa is making his own plans to leave.

"A third of everybody, almost, is thinking about leaving," he estimated.

"When people leave, they usually don't come back."

The hardest hit, experts agree, are the families who are unable even to move. Social scientists say they are the ones most vulnerable to traffickers and others who prey upon the poorest of the poor. They are left to make do as best they can.

Shaidullah said he is in that category. Covered in mud from working all day to rebuild Gabura's embankment, he described swimming frantically to his boat the night of the flood. There is no electricity in Gabura, and Shaidullah rowed in the black night across the river that moments earlier had been a rice paddy.

By the time he reached his mud and thatch house, the water had already crashed down a wall. His wife lay beneath it. Shaidullah carried her into the boat, where she crammed in with three of his sisters, his brother, the brother's wife and a nephew. They grabbed a few bags of rice and vegetables.

The rest – bed and pillows, mosquito net, pots and pans, the chicken, and two goats – sank beneath the swelling tide.

"We saved whatever we could get our hands on," Shaidullah said. "But everything else washed away."

Even before the flood, he said, things were hard. Not like years ago, when the rice fields were plentiful. No one in the village was ever rich, but no one starved, either. Shaidullah, in fact, said he was "quite well off" as a rice farmer. He could even save about 10,000 taka, or about \$145, each year.

"Now even the daily food is hard to come by," he said. On an average day, he and his wife eat patna, rice soaked with water and salt, and green bananas. His uncle left recently for India, and Shaidullah said he would like to look for work in Khulna, Bangladesh's third-largest city, just a few hours away by bus. But he doesn't see how that's even possible.

"How will we move from here?" he asked. "We don't have anything. We don't have any money to move, as bad as things are. So we have to stay here and make our life here as best as we can."

Reprinted from Greenwire with permission from Environment & Energy Publishing, LLC. www.eenews.net, 202-628-6500